

Practice Note: Working with Parents with Mental Health Challenges

Assessing Parent Functioning

Mental health concerns in parents can pose risk factors in parenting and thereby create significant risks to infants, children and youth. Child Welfare (CW) professionals responsible for the safety and protection of children need to understand parent functioning and the way in which mental health concerns in parents can significantly and negatively impact their caregiving behaviors and/or parenting skills. CW professionals can gain insight into the risk to children by identifying concerns in the daily functioning of parents. This shifts focus from obtaining a specific diagnosis of mental health and towards understanding and tracking adaptive functioning vs maladaptive functioning in caregiving. It is essential to review parent functioning regularly in supervision as well as to develop communication links with health care service providers such as mental health.

The World Health Organization Disability Assessment Schedule (WHODAS) 2.0 is a screening tool which can be used to assess the daily functioning skills of parents.

The WHODAS 2.0 tool provides information about how parents are managing, or not managing, their daily responsibilities. The screening tool can be completed with the parent, or can be done by proxy with a person that has observed the parent's functioning.

Following completion of the screening questions, the screening tool provides a score that indicates the level of risk in the parent's functioning ability. Since the WHODAS 2.0 is recognized as a functioning screening tool, the score can be shared with other health care professionals when sharing concerns about the parent. It can also be a discussion point in supervision and should be included in case notes.

WHODAS Domains

- *Cognition* – Understanding and communicating
- *Mobility* – Moving and getting around
- *Self-Care* – Personal hygiene, dressing, and eating
- *Getting Along* – Interacting with others
- *Life Activities* – Domestic responsibilities and work responsibilities
- *Participation* – Joining in community activities

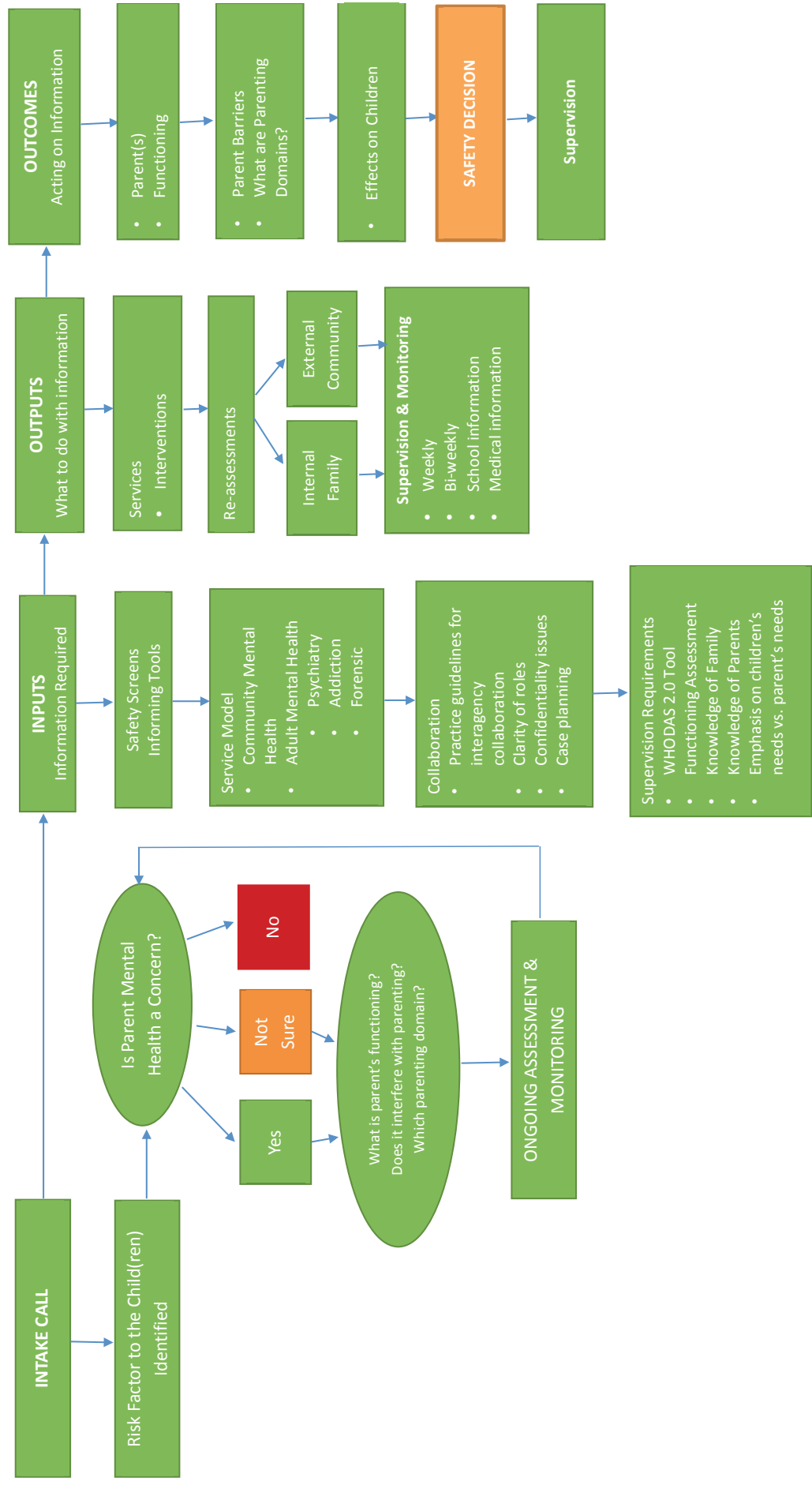
Parenting Domains

Parenting domains define areas of parenting that can create risks for the infant, child or youth. In understanding the different domains of parenting, the child welfare professional might recognize parenting challenges and/or strengths. The interplay of parental daily functioning skills coupled with an understanding of parenting domains will provide direction regarding the assessment of risk factors and the level of monitoring the parent(s) may need to protect their child(ren).

<i>Parent Model (Understanding of Parent Responsibilities)</i>	<i>Parent Behaviours Affecting Parenting</i>	<i>Patterns of Parent-Child Relationship</i>	<i>Acceptance for Responsibility for Change</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent's enactment of his/her responsibilities as a parent. • Parent's understanding of his/her role as the protector of their child's emotional and physical well-being. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent's ability to be responsive to, and contingent on the child's emotional, social, and physical needs. • Recognizing the child's need for co-regulation and acceptance of all feeling states. • Caregiving behaviours that promote healthy social, emotional and cognitive development, such as sensitivity, acceptance, responsiveness, and attunement. • Caregiving behaviours interfering with positive development, such as attending to needs inconsistently, responding with rejection, aggression, withdrawal, frightening the child, or being frightened of the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attachment Quality – secure / insecure / disorganized • Patterns the child has developed to stay close to the parent when in distress. • Patterns the child has developed to see the parent as helpful when exploring the environment. • Patterns the child and parent have developed to negotiate shared plans together vs. inability to do so. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are reasons a parent may need to change behaviours or patterns in relationship? • Benefits of the change for the relationship. • Parent's insight. • Parent's ability to be reflective about the experience of the child.

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Parent Functioning Assessment and Decision Tree



The Parent Functioning Assessment and Decision Tree helps to organize information the CW professional has obtained about the parent; for example, what are the risks identified? The tool indicates what information is required (*Inputs*) to better understand the risks and/or how to minimize the risks, and suggests what to do with the information obtained (*Outputs*), and how to coordinate and act on the information (*Outcomes*).

The *Intake Call* jumpstarts an ongoing process of situational evaluation, designed to keep child safety top of mind throughout the case work with the family.

The *Inputs* outlines the numerous types of information the worker must gather in order to make a plan for the family. These might include: available community mental health services, existing local service protocols, information gathering from other service providers involved with the family, and the types of information the worker might discuss with his/her supervisor, in order to help the family effectively.

The *Outputs* indicates what types of collaborative actions the worker might take in order to help the family. These include communication with other service providers, reassessing the family functioning periodically while service provision takes place, and determining how frequently the family might be discussed in supervision.

The *Outcomes* section indicates what determinations the worker might make, based on all the information gathered. First the worker must identify which parent (or both, if applicable) is presenting the concerning behaviour, and then assess functioning of each parent.

By including the information obtained in WHODAS and its application to the most challenged parenting domains, the Parent Functioning Assessment can indicate a level of risk that can be evaluated and/or discussed in supervision, so that life factors for the parent can be continually understood and monitored for risk.

The Parent Functioning Assessment can:

- Identify the needs of the family and monitor the level of intervention with the family.
- Match the service the family needs with the interventions the child welfare worker provides.
- Monitor inputs, outputs and outcomes, and provide an understanding of collaboration that is required to monitor risk factors.
- Set priorities in the service plan, which includes level of supervision for the family and continued emphasis on monitoring the identified family risks.
- Move away from the need for a mental health diagnosis as a barrier to allocating services for the family.

Summary Statement

Where parents have mental health issues, a thorough assessment using the WHODAS 2.0 tool and parent functioning can assist the child welfare professional in keeping children safe. Building relationships with health care service providers assists in addressing risk factors and provides an additional measure of safety. Partnerships and collaboration between child welfare and mental health professionals assists in connecting families to the most appropriate service in a timely manner and ultimately in keeping children safe.

Information about the use of the WHODAS 2.0 tool can be found at:
http://www.who.int/classifications/icf/more_whodas/en/